
OUR HERITAGE

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George H. Danner

Pennsylvania Antiquarian

The following information was provided to the Foundation by James D. McMahon, Jr., former curator of the Hershey Museum, when he did a program in our Carriage House meeting room a few years ago. Jim is now associated with the Milton S. Hershey School.

The images of the Stiegel Stove, Apostolic Clock and Schrank are used by permission of The Hershey Story, the museum on Chocolate Avenue in Hershey, Pennsylvania.

In the early 1930's Milton S. Hershey established an Indian Museum in the town which he had built around his chocolate factory. Like the town's pleasure park, ornate theater, and "Starlight Ballroom," the museum was provided as a source of enjoyment and recreation for Hershey's workers and their families. In 1935, in a move which broadened the focus of the original Indian Museum, Hershey bought a large and important collection that consisted primarily of old household artifacts and decorative arts objects. This collection had been put together by Lancaster County native George H. Danner between about 1870 and his death in 1917. While Danner's interests and taste were somewhat eclectic, like those of other early antiquarians, he concentrated his collecting mainly on household artifacts used by the early inhabitants of central Pennsylvania, especially those of German stock. Perhaps the most important feature today of Danner's collection lies in the ordinary quality of the things he acquired. For the most part, they are the things that people of average means used in their homes - - items that too often are not represented in museums. Today Danner's collection still forms the core of The Hershey Story museum's holdings.

George Danner was born in Manheim, Lancaster County in 1834. He was born to Daniel, a wood turner, and his wife Elizabeth. George attended school in Manheim through the age of nineteen, at which time he began learning the dry goods business working for David Baer in Lancaster. Danner stayed in Baer's employ for six years, making his residence in a Lancaster boarding house.

In 1860, at age 25, Danner returned to Manheim to open a general merchandise store in partnership with Jacob Kline. "Kline and Danner" operated in a modest two-story clapboard structure on Market Square. In 1861 the Civil War broke out, but Danner managed to avoid conscription by paying someone to take his place. Freed from military service, Danner prospered as a merchant, eventually buying out his partner Kline, and in 1882 he erected a new three-story brick building. He carried an assortment of products including dry goods, groceries, shoes, queensware, and men's clothing. In 1882 a reporter for the Lititz Record wrote of the building:



It is one of the largest in this county. Its dimensions are 30 by 125, three stories high, attached to which is the shoe department, also of respectable proportions. Everything is complete in structure from top to bottom, and well filled with goods of most any kind desired. In fact we agree with a friend at our elbow who thought Mr. Danner was a second John Wanamaker.

The bookkeepers' department is nicely arranged along the side, enclosed with plate glass. The counters and shelves are of handsomely ornamented wood; the front receives its daylight through the immense glass front of either side of the entrance, while the rear is furnished with skylights. At night no less than forty lights illumine the place with gas. On the second floor front is the carpet and oilcloth room, and in the rear is the clerks' sleeping department.

Danner employed several clerks, including his brother Aaron, to run the store. It was the clerks, in fact, who attended to everyday business while Danner kept a watchful eye on them. Every morning in his swallow-tail coat he would come in and settle into a chair by a round radiator in the middle of the store. There he spent the day, observing all comings and goings, issuing orders and corrections to the clerks, and chatting in Pennsylvania Dutch with his customers.

Danner's store continued to be profitable. He also became involved in other business ventures, helping to organize, and investing in, the United States Asbestos Company, Manheim Water Company, Manheim Manufacturing and Belting Company, and Manheim and Keystone National Banks, among others. He also acquired land holding in Seattle, Washington. Profits from his store, investment income, and money acquired through his marriage to Serena G. Weidler in 1867 made Danner a wealthy man.

In 1891 Danner enlarged his store, including in his addition a complete floor designed specifically to house his growing collection of antiques, relics, and curios. He prized his "relics," as he called them, so much that the new room was made fire-proof, and he installed an elevator to move things in and out, although visitors still had to climb two long flights of stairs to see them.



Just how and when Danner began collecting in a big way is still not certain. One story has it that he picked up his first objects from the fields at Gettysburg shortly after the battle. His obituary in the Manheim Sentinel and Lancaster County Advertiser, however, described his collecting and collection as follows:

In 1876 Mr. Danner began the collection of antiques. He conceived the idea from a corner china closet which his mother had filled with old dishes. He filled several similar closets. Then he arranged his collection in a small room, and later in a larger room, and so on until at present it fills a room 125 feet long by 19 feet wide, and yet there is not sufficient room. His collection consists of antiques of all descriptions including furniture, dishes, clocks, stoves, musical instruments, carved and ornamental wood, in fact all things that are rare and valuable. People of prominence from all parts of the country have visited and admired this wonderful collection. Mr. Danner collection of antiques is said to be the finest individual collection in the country. Men of authority have placed values on this collection ranging from \$50,000 to \$200,000.

During a period in which dramatic technological changes were taking place, George Danner had the vision to preserve things from an earlier era that many people thought of as out-of-fashion or behind-the-times. History held a special fascination for him. His purpose, the Philadelphia Inquirer reported in 1895, was "to awaken an interest in local history in the hearts of coming generations." He started his collection by saving family things that were handed down to him by his parents. And he never failed to tell his visitors about those family associations:

"Yes," he told the Lititz Record, "and here is mother's spinning wheel and reel, and here is her rocking chair, and the settee, and that was her bureau, as well as all the chairs in this room, and that bedstead and bedding over there in the corner was hers and that hat lying on the bed was father's."

Much of the richness associated with Danner's collection today can be attributed to the information he provided about the owners and origins of his artifacts. Many items that belonged to Danner's parents, and some that were used by other members of his family, including his grandparents, are well documented. Danner attached hand-written labels to some objects, and many others incorporate inscriptions into their fabric. A coverlet made by Manheim weaver John Brosey, for example, contains in its border the name E. Danner, referring to George's mother Elizabeth. A globe is inscribed "FREDERICK DANNER, MANHEIM, August 1834" within a heart-shaped border. Frederick, George's uncle and a minister and schoolteacher, drew the geographical features on the wooden globe turned by his brother Daniel. "A. Danner," George's grandfather Adam, owned the fire bucket that is so inscribed. The Danner family is well documented by the household possessions, clothing, personal books, and business and personal papers now owned by The Hershey Story Museum. These things provide extraordinary insight into the lives of some very ordinary people.

To the family objects which formed the nucleus of his early collection, George Danner added many things of local interest and importance. Of special fascination, not only to Danner but to subsequent generations as well, were things associated with Henry William Stiegel. A reporter for the Columbia Daily News wrote of his visit to Danner's museum in 1889,

The first object of attention was the old ten-plate stove made for Baron Stiegel in 1769. Although the plates were cast in coverless molds the designs are distinct and the letters read clearly: "H. W. Stiegel, Elizabeth Furnace 1769." A grist mill and a hunting scene are also depicted. The stove has been quite a traveler since it left Manheim, visiting Mt. Hope and Philadelphia and returning to Manheim only about a week ago.



The ring of a silver bell is not more clear and beautiful than that of three glass finger bowls made by this same great baron in the first glass works of America located at this place, and whereon hung both fame and poverty for the enterprising nobleman.

Popular interest in Stiegel items has always been as much, if not more, the result of his reputed eccentricities and lavish living as it was due to the beauty of the objects themselves.

Perhaps Danner's greatest love - - certainly his largest single collection - - was ceramics. He collected English ceramics especially avidly, particularly hand-painted creamware and pearlware, and transfer-printed Staffordshire wares. Danner corresponded with, bought from, and traded with a number of other ceramics collectors, including Edwin Atlee Barber, whose important collection went to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. By the time Milton Hershey bought Danner's museum, the ceramics collection numbered over 2,000 items and represented a broad range of English wares made for export. The Philadelphia Inquirer correspondent who visited Danner in 1895 was impressed by what he saw:

The largest collection by far is the glassware and china. This is arranged everywhere on the walls, forming Mr. Danner's initials, stars, and other fanciful patterns, and on dozens of tables.

Remarkable, the images formed by plates and soup bowls hanging on the wall can still be seen. The third floor of Danner's store, where he had his museum, has remained virtually untouched since the contents were removed to Hershey in 1935. As a result, dark shadows on the walls still show where plates, pictures, and "relics" were hung.

Danner's museum contained a broad range of objects aptly described as "relics" and "curios." Before the advent of television, radio, and movies, museum displays of curiosities, rarities, and oddities were a source of entertainment as well as education. Danner's curio collection included a large case full of stuffed birds, minerals, shells, animal horns, and

eggs; Indian artifacts; and things associated with great people and events. A Harrisburg resident wrote to Danner in 1899, "Dear Sir, Understanding that you appreciate "Curios" or relics it gives me pleasure to enclose you a wooden nutmeg made from the "Charter Oak" of Connecticut, together with a voucher thereof." Danner also had on display a block of wood taken from Old Ironsides. Unquestionably the greatest curio of all was the famed "Apostolic Clock," which every hour put on a show depicting Christ blessing his Apostles, along with other symbolic and religious figures. The clock was given to Danner, so the story goes, by its maker, John Fiester. Danner apparently cared for Fiester during a period of illness, and Fiester gave Danner the monumental clock out of gratitude.



Danner's collecting took him beyond his family and beyond Manheim, throughout central and southeastern Pennsylvania, occasionally even out-of-state. The Manheim Sun reported in 1891 that Danner had recently purchased from a woman in Chicago a table "upon which General Lafayette took his meals during his visit to Baltimore in 1824." Danner also bought things for his museum at two world's fairs; the Centennial Exposition at Philadelphia in 1876 and the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition in Seattle 1909. He purchased primarily souvenirs.

Danner developed quite a reputation as a collector of things old and antiquated. He regularly received letters offering to sell or donate what many people were anxious to get rid of. Danner himself was active in seeking out appropriate old things, making regular forays into the countryside. After Danner's death, his former clerk John Gish recalled the story of how Danner found an eighteenth-century schrank:

The large wardrobe with the legend "1768 P H W S P" and very beautifully inlaid, and with rat tail hinges was discovered by Mr. Danner in the barn of a Mr. Shriner at Lexington three mile north of Lititz. It was white-washed and being used as a harness closet. Mr. Danner scraped the whitewash away at several places and discovered it to be a solid walnut cabinet, and upon purchasing it he had it re-finished as it is today.



Danner was notorious for a favorite method of acquiring the china he prized so highly. To the unsuspecting owner of an old lusterware tea set he might say, "Why, that china is old - - you'd like some nice new china, wouldn't you?" And he would immediately offer to replace the luster with brand new, plain white queensware. Danner is still remembered today for his wily, even conniving attempts to acquire things for his collection.

Danner's museum, also known as his "Relic Rooms," was open to the public every Thursday. Admission was free, although Danner maintained a collection box labeled "Benevolence." He or one of his clerks guided visitors through the museum, taking "great pains to impart the interesting data concerning the various objects." During his lifetime thousands of people came to see his collection. Most were from central Pennsylvania, but a significant number came from outside the state. Danner's obituary reported on the museum's popularity:

The museum was distinctly one of the points of interest in Lancaster County, and many thousands of Lancastrians and visitors to the Garden Spot were taken through it by the gracious courtesy of its owner. Nothing gave him greater pleasure. Even hundreds of distinguished foreigners visiting at various times in this locality have registered their names in the big book of record he kept, while pilgrimages by schools were frequent.

George Danner died in 1917, predeceased by his wife, and without children. His will instructed the executors to make the following provisions for the museum:

My collection of antiques, old dishes, and curios in the fireproof room on the third story of the store building, shall not be sold, but shall be retained by my Executors . . . as a museum for the instruction and amusement of the public. My Executors . . . shall appoint an honest and upright person . . . to open the museum every Thursday during nine months of the year and take visitors through the room, but no children under six years of age shall be permitted, as they are too young to appreciate it. The room shall be closed to visitors during the months of July, August and September of each year, during which time the room and contents shall be thoroughly cleaned by the superintendent. Everything in the room shall be kept intact as it now is If friends at any time desire to contribute any rare curios to the museum, the superintendent shall receive them with thanks and shall carefully label them.

The museum had given pleasure to many visitors during Danner's lifetime, and he hoped to guarantee that it would continue unchanged after he died. But Danner had another, conflicting goal: he wanted to establish a home for the elderly poor of Manheim. To that end, he instructed his executors to build the "Danner Home," as it was to be called, when the income generated by his estate grew to \$20,000. The "Home" would be built next to the house where Danner grew up, and would be furnished with Danner's household possessions.

One year before his death, Danner modified his will. He was concerned that his estate might not produce \$20,000 in accumulated income, so he directed his executors to see how much money accrued after 20 years. If they had only \$10,000 they were to go ahead and construct a less expensive building. And as a last resort, if it were the only way to finance the "Home," they were to sell Danner's museum.

In 1935, still lacking sufficient funds to build the "Danner Home" the executors of Danner's estate decided that they would have to sell the museum. Milton Hershey, perhaps through his family relationship to Danner's business partner and executor, Monroe M. Pfautz, learned that the collection was for sale and offered to buy it for \$50,000. Three years later the Danner collection was on view in the former Ice Palace at Hershey, newly remodeled as the Hershey Museum.

Danner's place in the story of early collecting and antiquarianism remains to be explored. Certainly he was among the very earliest Pennsylvanians to develop an interest in preserving old artifacts. Edwin Atlee Barber, the ceramics collector and scholar, was a contemporary of Danner. He served on the staff of the Philadelphia Museum of Art from 1892 until his death in 1916. Henry Chapman Mercer helped to establish the Bucks County Historical Society in 1880, and avidly collected things that would "illustrate the daily of a people at a given time" in the early part of this century. The efforts of these and other early collectors merit comparison and further study.

The following appeared in the August 29, 1889 issue of The Manheim Sun newspaper:

ANOTHER RELIC

Mr. M. N. Brubaker has presented to Geo. H. Danner an old relic, which is of historical interest. It is a printed form of a petition from H. W. Stiegel, the founder of Manheim to be released from prison where he was confined for debt. The following is a copy:

Philadelphia, December 15, 1774

Sir,

Please to take Notice, That I have applied to the Honorable House of Assembly, for a Law to relieve my person from Imprisonment. If you have any Objection, pleased to attend on Monday next, at three o'clock in the afternoon, at the Gaol in this city, before the Committee of Grievances.

**Your humble Servant
Henry W. Stiegel**

BEFORE THE REVOLUTION A RELIC OF "YE OLDEN TIME"

A Stove Used in Manheim 120 Years Ago - - Geo. H. Danner Secures Another Trophy to Place in His Bazaar on Market Square.

Mr. Geo. H. Danner is untiring in his endeavors to collect articles of antiquity, and placing them where the public can revel among these curiosities of days gone by. Anything that pertains to Manheim and vicinity has an especial charm for him and calls forth extra efforts on his part to secure it. By doing this he is building up a name and reputation that will live after him, and the future generations of this borough will rise up and hold his name in grateful remembrance.

His latest achievement has been to secure an old fashioned ten plate stove, formerly owned by Baron Stiegel the founder of this borough. This stove is 120 years old and is a good specimen of mechanism of those early days, when this country was as yet an English colony.

This stove in front is adorned with the rural scene of a house and trees and a large house-dog. On the back is elegant scroll work and the name of H. W. Stiegel, Elizabeth Furnace, 1769 stands out in bold relief. The weight of the stove is 615 pounds.

Elizabeth Furnace was near where the village of Brickerville now stands, and there is yet a huge cinder pile and some old dilapidated buildings to mark the spot.

This stove was formerly owned by Henry Eby, an old resident of this place. Later it was purchased by Sue Eby, at her grandfather's sale; afterwards purchased by A. Bates Grubb and has remained in that family up to the present time.

The present head of that family A. B. Grubb, Esq., was going to present it to a historical society, when Mr. Danner approached him and offered to purchase it. He was informed that it was not for sale, but Mr. Grubb kindly donated it to the people of Manheim. After it was shipped, a brief letter from Mr. Grubb stated the fact that it was a gift from him, to be kept for the people of Manheim forever.

THE MANHEIM SUN
June 27, 1889

AN ANCIENT CURIO WITH A REVOLUTIONARY HISTORY

Perhaps one of the most valuable and most interesting curios or additions to Danner's Mammoth Private Museum placed in it for some time was an old-time powder horn which the owner secured from Mr. A. H. Earle, of Philadelphia, a few days ago. It is only an ordinary horn of an ox fixed into a powder horn, which many of our people well remember as in general use here many years ago. But with this there is an interesting history connected. On the horn is engraved in real artistic letters: "Caleb Hotchkiss, the 4th. of New Haven, Made in New Haven January the 10th., 1759. In the field of battle I stand up stout where men lie reeking on the ground, O. I. powder, with my brother ball most hero-like do conker all. When fire comes there soon I am spent and I don't care the o vent. - - F. I. N. S." Below this is the representation of a fish and the English coat of arms.

This powder horn was undoubtedly the property of one Caleb Hotchkiss, and, as the date upon it notes, in 1759 - - one hundred and forty years ago. This ancient curio was found in a cave in Schuylkill County, near the river, by the father of Mr. A. H. Earle, upon one of his periodical hunting trips through that region upwards of fifty years ago. When discovered the horn lay upon a ledge of rock in the cave. By the side of these rocks lay a number human bones, most of which were badly decayed. These human bones, taken into consideration with the inscription, would indicate that they were all the mortal remains of an English soldier, who during the revolutionary period entered the cave as a place of shelter, perhaps to save himself from the ravages of severe winter weather, or may be from an attack of wild beasts.

The powder horn is in an excellent state of preservation, and is highly prized by Mr. Danner, who will give it a prominent place in the Museum upon its reopening.

MANHEIM SENTINEL
September 1, 1899